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AFROCENTRISM, HIP-HOP, AND THE “BLACK QUEEN”: UTILIZING HIP-HOP FEMINIST METHODS TO CHALLENGE CONTROLLING IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Afrocentrism is a political framework that has aided Black intellectuals and scholars in re-conceptualizing a world with Blackness at its center. However, Afrocentrism has left the most marginalized people in the Black community—Black women, Black queer individuals and Black trans women—invisible and exploited. Hip-Hop Feminism, a Black feminist movement that emerged in the 1980s, developed a powerful framework to refute the oppressive language and sexually-exploitive images of women in mainstream hip-hop. Inaccurate and stereotypical images of Black women continue to plague Black social media, recreating toxic and controlling images of Black womanhood. This paper examines the multifaceted framework of Hip-Hop Feminism and discusses its relevance in dismantling the negative and reductive images of Black women that dominate social media.

Afrocentrism and Hip-Hop: The Correlation

Black Feminist scholar and educator Patricia Hill Collins describes Black cultural nationalism as the foundation of Afrocentrism. Black cultural nationalism “aims to reconstruct Black consciousness by... [placing] the interests and needs of African people at the center of any discussion.”¹ Black cultural

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, “When Fighting Words Are Not Enough: The Gendered Content of Afrocentrism,” in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 99.

nationalism shifted Black culture from the margins to the center of national conversations. Like Afrocentrism, Black cultural nationalism allows Black people to learn about themselves, their culture, and the rest of the world through an African-centered lens. Through Afrocentrism came the idea of *Black essentialism*, which emerged in the 1960's African American intellectualism as a means of constructing a normative Black identity, or an "authentic" Black person with "pure" African biology and "soul." "Soul" was conceptualized as the "essence" of Blackness—a consciousness accessible through the physical biology, experiences, and perceptions of a Black person, and many Black Nationalists believed that "soul... is distinctive to Black people and that only Blacks can access [it]."²

Collins also shows that Afrocentric activists had strong ideas about Black women's reproductive rights. Some Black Nationalists deemed contraceptives and family planning services as "Black genocide," and, citing examples such as the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment, encouraged Black women to increase the Black race by "having a baby for the nation." Responding to incidents of police brutality and the incarceration of Black men in massive numbers, Black Nationalists proclaimed that the Black community was under attack by white supremacy. Black women who were "virginal, married, good girls... [who] are sexually active only within the context of marriage and family" were deemed the "conscious rising essence of Blackness."³ The idealized Black woman was heterosexual, monogamous, and married to and having children with a Black man.

Imamu Amiri Baraka and other Black Nationalists claimed that emotional labor is one of the most defining characteristics of the "essential" Black woman. Collins cites Baraka, who wrote, "We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the

² Patricia Hill Collins, "When Fighting Words Are Not Enough: The Gendered Content of Afrocentrism," in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 104.

³ Patricia Hill Collins, "When Fighting Words Are Not Enough: The Gendered Content of Afrocentrism," in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 109.

social development of the nation.”⁴ Black women were to put their men, children and Black nation before themselves, though there were no such standards for Black men. Collins responds, “Within a double standard context, Black women become mothers of the nation, while Black men serve as warriors of the revolution.”⁵ Black women were given no choice—they were expected to become “mothers of the nation,” a role that lacked power and agency, despite its seeming dignity. Those Black women who did not want to have children, and those interested in romantic relationships with a person outside of their race or outside of heterosexual norms, were left invisible and seen as “traitors” to the race. Black Nationalist ideology allowed Black women little agency over their own bodies or their lives.

An example of the hypervisibility of Black women is the public identity created for Angela Y. Davis, a Black scholar and activist associated with the Black Panther Party and Black Power Movement of the late 20th century. Her identity as a lesbian, and her persistent fight for LGBTQ+ rights, has been erased in many Black history books. In many ways, she has been reduced to an image of a Black woman with an afro—as if her hair was the extent of her resistance to white supremacy. Collis writes, “The homophobia in Black cultural nationalism seems linked to this belief that maintaining a conservative gender ideology is essential for Black families, communities, and the Black nation as a family.”⁶ Policing women’s bodies, reproductive rights, and sexual identity was not only a foundation of Afrocentrism, it permeated Black culture as a whole. As hip-hop made its way from the “underground” music of the 1980’s to MTV screenings and the top of the Billboard charts, images of Blackness were seen worldwide. The heteronormative, homophobic and misogynist ideas that permeated Afrocentrism were reflected in hip-hop lyrics and the videos of the era, policing and condemning Black women who challenged the Nationalist norms.

In, “What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda,” Black feminist rhetorician Gwendolyn D.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁶ Ibid., 111.

Pough analyzes the degrading stereotypes in mainstream hip-hop. One popular stereotype is known as the “video ho,” or the “video vixen,” a Black woman who embodies physical objectification, submission, and sexual availability to men. This oversexualized image is used as a prop for the man or men who are always the focus and protagonists of the song. In Tupac Shakur’s enormously successful “I Get Around,” the artist is joined by “Shock G” and “Money B” in proudly rapping about their sexual freedom:

[Money B]

*Oh, you heard that I was bangin' / Your homegirl
you went to school with? / That's cool, but did
she tell you about her sister? / And your cousin
thought I wasn't / See, weekends were made for
Michelob / But it's a Monday, my day, so just let
me hit it, yo.*

[2Pac]

*You don't know me, you just met me, you won't let
me / Well, if I couldn't have it (silly rabbit) / why
you sweatin' me? / It's a lot of real G's doin' time /
'Cause a groupie bent the truth and told a lie.⁷*

Tupac alludes to his own conviction for rape, which he firmly denied by explaining that the victim lied about the assault out of her frustration from receiving too little attention from the artist. In the end, the rapper spent only nine months in jail and returned to hip-hop as a legend, producing music that re-victimized the woman and mocked her sexual assault. Tupac used his music to erase the harm of the assault by promoting the hypervisible image of a woman who is both voiceless and always sexually available to Black men.

Black women who experience abuse are often invisible in mainstream media. In, “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms,” Patricia Hill Collins describes the conundrum of the hypervisibility and invisibility of Black women within hip-hop:

The visibility of black women in the current cultural marketplace is often predicated on their

⁷ Tupac Shakur, “I Get Around,” in *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z....*, Atlantic Records, 1993.

willingness to conform to already existing ideas of black womanhood and femininity... however, when black women are removed from the ‘intimate yet anonymous terrain of CDs, music videos, movies, Internet websites and other forms of contemporary mass media’ they are no longer tolerable and, in response, their hypervisibility is yet again replaced with their invisibility.”⁸ (25).

Very similarly, within the framework of Afrocentrism, the “essential,” Black-male-pleasing Black woman has a protected position within the Black community so long as her role remains that of a submissive, heterosexual giver to the Black race. If she steps out of this role, or any role created by Black Nationalist men, she simply does not exist to the Black community and is certainly not a member of it. In the case of hip-hop, once the video vixen walks away from her role as a sexually available object, she no longer serves Black men, and is therefore no longer worthy of attention or protection. In some cases, she is targeted for humiliation by the hip-hop artists themselves.

Another familiar character in many hip-hop stories that has its roots in Afrocentrism is the “ride-or-die chick.” This character is different from the video vixen in that her purpose is not only for sexual and visual pleasure, but also to protect her Black man. Pough describes this character, and the lyrics in hip-hop that define her, as a woman who will essentially do anything to protect her man, even if that means killing someone or committing a crime. She goes on to cite the consequences real women have faced for giving into the role of the ride-or-die chick. Many women have been jailed for crimes a boyfriend, husband, or partner pushed them into doing.⁹ While they were serving jail time Black men could be the free “warriors of the revolution” as Collins suggests.

Similarly, the “Real Black Girl / Revolutionary But Gangsta” (RGB) image romanticizes a much more appealing type

⁸ Whitney A. Peoples, “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms.” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 25.

⁹ Gwendolyn D. Pough, “What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda,” *Black Women, Gender Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 78-99.

of ride-or-die chick. Pough sites lyrics from a Dead Prez song title “Revolutionary But Gangsta.” “down for the dirt, / for better or for worse, / got my gun in a purse / in case a nigga get searched.”¹⁰

The use of the word “real” in the acronym for RBG, *Real Black Girl*, is connected to the Afrocentric idea of “soul.” “Realness” marginalizes women who do not fit into the proclaimed universal yet very narrow Afrocentric definition of Black. In the RBG hip-hop context, her womanhood and Blackness are up for question if she does not subscribe to the glorification of risking her life to protect her own Black men.

The Hip-Hop Feminist Response

Though Hip-Hop Feminism emerged as a direct challenge to the images of Black women in mainstream hip-hop lyricism and music videos, Black feminists had begun responding to the misogyny coming from within the Black community decades before hip-hop began. Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis all addressed the specific issues faced by women of color, and specifically Black women, as early as the late 1960’s. In an essay titled, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde asks the white essentialist self-proclaimed feminist, “what is the theory behind racist feminism?”¹¹ (111). Lorde questions and refutes the validity of a feminist framework that uses the same oppressive tools as patriarchy. A specific feminist theory that caters to the multiple marginalized identities of Black women has always been a necessity, but has been historically pushed to the margins in all waves of the white feminist movement. In her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker coined the term *Womanist* for “a Black feminist or feminist of color.”¹² (2). Inspiration for the term itself came straight from the voices of Black mothers to their daughters.

In 1981, just two years before the publication of Walker’s seminal essay, the very first music video aired on a new television network: MTV (Music Television). Though MTV showed no

¹⁰ Gwendolyn D. Pough. “What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda,” *Black Women, Gender Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 85.

¹¹ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110- 114.

¹² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 2.

music videos by Black artists in its first year, soon the program *Yo! MTV Raps* gave hip-hop artists a platform to visually display their music for a popular national audience.

As hip-hop became more mainstream, the level of white consumption of the genre increased and stereotypical and degrading images of Black women in hip-hop music videos spread around the world. Equipped with a growing Womanist framework, Black feminists challenged the misogyny, colorism, homophobia and heteronormativity of mainstream hip-hop. Black feminists also reclaimed hip-hop itself, and began producing music and videos that told the embodied experience of Black women, thus creating Hip-Hop Feminism.

Queen Latifah speaks to the Black women who have been influenced to put another life before theirs, whether it be for Black Nationalism or for an individual Black man. In her videos, Latifah addresses domestic violence and the psychological, physical, and sexual harassment that many Black women have faced from Black men. Often depicted as powerful and flanked by other women, Latifah directly challenges men to think about their attitudes and behavior toward Black women—attitudes and behavior that formed the core of Afrocentrism. These challenges were taboo in Black Nationalist thinking.

Hip-Hop Feminism is not limited to Black feminist music; instead, it embraces all expressions of Black womanhood. Hip-Hop Feminist scholars Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper and Susana Morris define Hip-Hop Feminism as “a cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-civil rights or hip-hop generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation.”¹³ Essentially, Hip-Hop Feminism is an expression of the embodied experiences of Black women that simultaneously challenge structures inside and outside of the Black community that degrade, misrepresent and suppress expressions of Black womanhood, gender identity, and sexuality.

¹³ Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721-737. doi:10.1086/668843.

Bell hooks, widely known as a Black feminist academic, adds to Hip-Hop Feminist critiques of male-dominant video culture: “Black females must not be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting.”¹⁴ A call to resist is the most prominent theme in Hip-Hop Feminist music and theory. Resisting through music, visually and lyrically, becomes the true representation of Black women, created by Black women themselves.

Accurate portrayals of Black womanhood need to be visible to mainstream audiences, and Hip-Hop Feminism created a non-academic platform for Black women and girls to express themselves. Ruth Nicole Brown, an author and Hip-Hop Feminist scholar, writes of her interaction with many young Black girls who “literally speak through hip-hop.”¹⁵ However, there is still no loving reciprocity from mainstream hip-hop culture. Brown writes, “Black girls are governed by such discourse that invokes their well-being but does not value their presence.”¹⁶ The discourse Brown speaks of is the negativity expressed from mainstream hip-hop and the “presence” she mentions is the *true* presence of Black women within hip-hop, not the one crafted by men.

Controlling Images Within Social Media: The “Black Queen”

Social media has become a new platform for creating and spreading social movements. The three queer Black women who conceptualized and created the Black Lives Matter movement, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, used social media to promote their movement after the murder of Trayvon Martin. On Twitter, an internet site on which an individual may use only 140 characters in a single post, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, coupled with a tagged video of the most recent police brutality, was enough to turn a revolution-in-the-making into a movement. Tweets turned into physical action, sparking protests of all kinds

¹⁴ bell hooks, “Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap? Misogyny, Gangsta Rap, and The Piano,” *Z Magazine*, February 1994.

¹⁵ Ruth Nicole Brown, “Theorizing Narrative Discrepancies of Black Girlhood,” in *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

around the United States and the world.¹⁷ Within Twitter itself is a very powerful subset called Black Twitter: a Black intellectual platform where the exchanging and spreading of ideas happens on a form of media that is easily accessible to many Black individuals. Within these special Black realms of Social media, Black individuals are creating and recreating images of Blackness on their own terms. However, many representations of Black women on social media are negative, and this is a problem.

The “Black Queen” is an image heavily inspired by Afrocentric essentialism. Conceptualized as the “ideal” Black woman, the Black Queen is a controlling image created and promoted by Black men on social media sites. Controlling images are often first interpreted as a positive and uplifting representation of Black women, but a deeper analysis reveals them to be oppressive. In the essay “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,” Patricia Hill Collins defines a controlling image as “socially constructed... images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination.”¹⁸ Whether it be the mammy image of the passive, happy Black servant, or the deceptive, lazy drug abusing welfare queen, controlling images of Black women persist on TV, movies screens and in social media. The Black Queen can be described as a strong woman who wears her natural afro as her crown, carries herself with poise, is heterosexual, cisgender, does not behave in a sexual manner, and is a passionate activist, but remains subordinate to and protective of Black men. The Black Queen was created by Black men for the purpose of “maintaining Black women’s subordination”¹⁹ (72). The historical objectification of Black women throughout the half-millennium of Western slavery trapped them in an idealized binary as the opposite to the good, pure white woman—Black women are portrayed by Eurocentric culture as evil and promiscuous. In contrast, Afrocentric culture promotes the Black Queen as sexually pure and chaste.

¹⁷ Charles “Chip” P. Linscott, “Introduction: #BlackLivesMatter and the Mediatic Lives of a Movement,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 2 (2017): 75-80. doi:10.2979/blackcamera.8.2.04.

¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins. “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

Much like the Revolutionary But Gangsta (RBG) character in hip-hop lyrics and videos, the Black Queen is awarded with an image of honor and respectability—but her virtues are defined by Black men according to *their* values. The Black Queen, for example, is valued for her indomitable strength. This strength, however, is only valued when it is extended to help Black men. The idea that Black women are the backbone of the Black community, are always there in times of trouble to hold up and encourage her people is nothing new, but the Black Queen exists only to please the men who fashioned her.

Responding With Hip-Hop Feminist Methods

Hip-Hop Feminism combats degrading, stereotypical and untrue representations of a Black community in creative ways. This is what is needed to break down controlling images on social media today.

In their essay, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built,” Hip-Hop Feminist scholars Durham, Cooper, and Morris describe the ways in which resistance is being manifested today. Hip-Hop Feminism is a “public pedagogy” that enacts consciousness-raising to combat the “...sexual scripts [that] activate controlling images or power-laden stereotypes”²⁰ within mainstream, heteronormative, misogynistic, male-dominated hip-hop. When feminist thought over-relies on academia, consciousness-raising takes place in the scholarly world through article publications and books, but this may limit the immediate impact of such work. Hip-Hop Feminism reaches everyday people, regardless of their education or class status. Durham, Cooper, and Morris write, “Today, the blogosphere has become the digital public forum for feminist consciousness-raising, and social media platforms...have morphed into virtual command centers to mobilize coalitions for grassroots activism.”²¹

Pro-Black movements have always been deemed “non-traditional” in the eyes of white patriarchal Western society, so it is hardly surprising that Hip-Hop Feminism uses non-academic methods to start movements to raise public consciousness. Three years ago when I searched the word “misogynoir” on the internet,

²⁰ Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 729. doi:10.1086/668843.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 731. doi:10.1086/668843.

of the very few links that came up, the very first one took me to a website called “Gradient Lair.” This website, which is continuing to evolve, began as a collaborative effort between multiple Black women to showcase Black women’s culture, scholarly work, and lived experiences. The word “lair” is defined on their website as, “a retreat or creative space for reflection, reasoning and resolution.”²² A creative space for Black women is extremely necessary as they continue to face new denigrating and untrue images of Black women.

Black women blogging or vlogging about their lives and interactions with other Black men or self-proclaimed white feminists is a way to raise consciousness about the real everyday lives of Black women—without the inherent constraints of academe. Real stories of Black women’s struggles and triumphs can work to dispel the mystical fantasy of the Black Queen concept.

Another new, non-academic and Hip-Hop Feminist method to combating modern day controlling images is the use of “Afrofuturism.” Afrofuturism is defined as images and representations of Black American culture and experiences through modern technology, and “can be understood as an epistemology that both examines the current problems faced by blacks... and critiques [and] interpretations of the past and the future.”²³ Afrofuturism can be used to accomplish consciousness-raising, but can do much more. Some current Afrofuturistic artists include Janelle Monae and Erykah Badu, who sing and rap about future Black worlds, some post-apocalyptic, others full of robots and unimaginable technology. In the song, “Violet Stars Happy Hunting,” Janelle Monae sings, “I’m a cybergirl without a face a heart or a mind, / (a product of the man, I’m a product of the man), / I’m a savior without a race (without a face).”²⁴

While Monae expresses the feelings of the “cyber” characters in her song, she is also expressing her own feelings as a Black woman today. This is how Afrofuturism uses ideas of the future and realities of today to talk about Blackness.

²² Trudy, “Explanation of Misogynoir,” *Gradient Lair*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.gradientlair.com/post/84107309247/define-misogynoir-anti-black-misogyny-moya-bailey-coined>.

²³ Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 731. doi:10.1086/668843.

²⁴ Janelle Monae, “Violet Stars, Happy Hunting,” in *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, Bad Boy, 2007.

CONCLUSION

Accurate images and representations of Black people have always been important to the Black community. To see ourselves as we are, on our own terms and in our own space and safety, has been a long fight for the Black community. While the original Hip-Hop Feminist rappers such as Queen Latifah directly addressed Hip-Hop stereotypes, Afrofuturistic music dreams of a better tomorrow. Due to the heteropatriarchal influence of Black Cultural Nationalism and Afrocentrism, Black women have been handed an even more complex fight to see themselves represented as they are. Black feminist scholar Gwendolyn Pough cites the Combahee River Collective in her assertion that for Black women, “to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”²⁵ Black women – queer, trans, gender-nonconforming, *all* intersections of Black women – have never been recognized as levelly human. We often find ourselves on polar sides of social binaries. Hip-Hop Feminism and the emerging field of Afrofuturism give us the necessary and unique tools to step back up on the stage that Black women built.

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²⁵ Gwendolyn D. Pough, “What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda,” *Black Women, Gender Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 78-99.

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